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12 May 1986

ESSAY | William Safire

Spilling the NID

WASHINGTON William Casey, Director of Central Intelligence, appears to be getting nervous in the service on the subject of leaks. Having been made the laughingstock of world spookery by his mishandling of the defector Yurchenko, he is now threatening journalists with jail terms for publishing secrets other than those leaked from the top.

He is joined in this always-popular pastime of intimidation by David Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, whose heavily publicized midlife crisis makes him seem, in my opinion, eager to show he has not become a blabbermouth.

Let me put forward my own National Estimate of the crackbrained crackdown.

John McMahon, until two months ago the C.I.A.'s Deputy Director, was the product of its intelligence-gathering side, and resisted Director Casey's policy (with which I agree) of putting missiles in the arms of freedom fighters willing to shoot them at oppressors in Afghanistan, Africa and Nicaragua.

He was booted out and replaced by Robert Gates, who came up through the evaluation rather than gathering branch. Mr. Gates is thus more a driver of spies than a spy by trade; he is comfortable with the Casey covert action, and his pride and joy has been the National Intelligence Daily.

This "NID," with its blue cardboard cover and 10 or 12 pages of information, is the evaluated product of the intelligence community. The circulation is limited to about 200 officials whose lowest clearance is "top secret," and who enjoy the thrill of insidership six mornings a week. (On Sundays they have to rely on the newspapers, and can catch up on what is happening.)

Do not confuse the NID with the P.D.B. — the President's Daily Briefing, in the white cover — which goes to only a handful of people, and which I presume contains poop from the human group as well as from satellites and big ears. (I used to confuse the NID with the New International Dictionary, Merriam-Webster's Unabridged, and found it difficult to understand why spooks were concerned that "the NID is leaking.")

That's it. That's the reason Mr. Casey is having fits, losing sight of the freedoms we hired him to protect: the NID is leaking.

Rather than consider if secrets are coming out of C.I.A. or N.S.A. (No Such Agency), where fooling the polygraph is child's play, the blame is being placed on the consumers of intelligence: the 200 NID subscribers, a third of whom are in the Pentagon.

A scapegoat was needed to send a warning to the list, and to justify the lie detector "experiment" within the Pentagon. After a story appeared in the Evans and Novak column about using Zaire as the distributor of missiles to the Savimbi insurgents in Angola — information that may have been in the NID — Michael Pillsbury, a Defense official, was fluttered and bounced.

"Mike the Pill" was expendable; as a Senate aide in the hard-line "Madison Group" during the Carter era, Mr. Pillsbury was a valued Casey-Weinberger ally; but now the Jesse Helms crowd is losing its clout and the firing of Mike the Pill could serve as a warning to others. Moreover, a head on a platter was needed for Zaire.

Then Bill Casey went a bridge too far. To scare the press, he went to The Washington Post to say that if a certain Bob Woodward story was published, he would recommend prosecution under some untested statute. "I'm not threatening, but..."

The Justice Department, however, while willing to go after leakers in Gov-

The C.I.A. tries to spook the press

ernment, is unwilling to join Mr. Casey in chilling the leakers in the press.

One reason is that law enforcement officials have long been aware of, and are discreetly curious about, meetings held in Mr. Casey's home, alone, between the Director and reporter Woodward, who is writing a book about the C.I.A.

I would never ask Bob Woodward about that, because a man's sources or non-sources are nobody's business but his own. But a few months back I put the question buzzing around Justice directly to my old friend Casey.

"I haven't seen Woodward for 18 months," was the gruff reply. No basis at all to the obvious F.B.I. wonderment if Mr. Casey was the source of the stories he most complains about. He does readily admit seeing Mr. Woodward (as he did me) long ago.

I do not suggest that the Director of Central Intelligence has ever been the source of a fact the Government does not want known. But to the extent politicians on background seek to use journalists to advance policy, Mr. Casey and even higher officials are "sources." They will find their outlets turn user-unfriendly when their carrots become sticks.